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Cracking Gender Stereotypes? Challenges Women Political Leaders Face

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Abstract

Despite the increasing representation of women in political institutions, women face severe challenges that men do not face. Drawing from scholarly evidence, Shan-Jan Sarah Liu explains the barriers that lie ahead of women politicians and explores how challenges may be alleviated in political institutions.

Introduction

In the last few decades, the world has witnessed progress on the representation of women in political institutions. Women are being elected into office. On average, the percentage women in national legislatures across the world increased from 12% in 1997 to 24% in the present day. In 2018 alone, seven women were sworn in as heads of the state – a breaking record for any previous year of women reaching the highest level of public office. Albeit slowly, progress has indeed been made. Women seem to finally play a part in what is traditionally considered a “man’s game.” Female political leaders, however, still face issues and challenges that their male counterparts do not. For instance, it is more difficult for women political candidates to raise donations for their campaigns than for men. Examples like the \$500,000 gender gap in campaign fundraising in the 2018 U.S. house race suggest that there is still a long road to gender equality.

Many scholars have explored explanations for why women are underrepresented in political institutions. This article, instead, examines obstacles that confront women once they actually enter the race and hold political power. It evaluates future actions to ensure that the political arena is an egalitarian place for women – an institution where women and men are not treated or perceived differently. It argues that we need to look beyond numbers when considering the political status of women. Gender equality and parity in political institutions are unlikely to be achieved unless gender norms are eliminated – the expectations that women belong to the home and men belong to the political arena. Such work can only be done in a collective effort of the general public, the media, political parties, and the like.

Less Competent? Biases Against Women Politicians

Prior scholarship has explained various reasons for the underrepresentation of women in political institutions. For example, electoral systems make a difference for how likely women are to be nominated for candidacy. Political parties in countries with a proportional representation system nominate women at a higher rate than those in countries with a single member district plurality system (Matland 2005). Women are less likely to be recruited as an eligible candidate than men are, ultimately excluding women from the political deliberation process (Fox and Lawless 2009). Young women are found to be less politically ambitious than young men, prohibiting them to consider candidacy when they enter adulthood (Fox and Lawless 2014). These studies show that women are at a disadvantage before entering politics. What happens, however, when women actually try to break the barriers and take the plunge to become officeholders?

Research shows that differences still persist in the experiences of male and female politicians. Besides the patriarchal set ups and norms that differentially position men and women, stereotypes can be one of the most significant obstacles for female leadership. Voters have limited time and energy to devote to political matters; therefore, they rely on stereotypes to help them evaluate political leaders.

Stereotyping, or assigning characteristics to political leaders of a certain group, however, is largely gender-based. Female politicians are seen as kind, warm, and compassionate whereas male politicians are seen as assertive, tough, and competent. Although the extent to which these stereotypes help or hurt female candidates electorally is debatable, they indicate that women are not considered leader-material. Particularly, voters demonstrate their preference for stereotypically masculine traits over feminine traits when determining who should hold powerful positions and make decisions for them (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993).

These gender-based assumptions of politician characteristics raise two important implications. First, women are less likely to be considered as political leaders. Not only does this bias illustrate that women are seen as subordinate to them, but it has long term consequences on the likelihood of women entering politics. When girls are socialized into believing that women are not as suitable to be leaders as men are, they grow up ignoring public seat a career option. The acceptance of these gender stereotypes also suggests that the gender disparity in political institutions is difficult to overcome if the understanding of women's and men's roles continue to remain conventional.

Second, even when women are brave enough to enter a political race, female politicians must possess and illustrate masculine characteristics should they wish to gain a seat at the table. While women may be aware of the need to exert their leadership skills and competency, women also face a paradoxical challenge as their independence and agency are less desirable than men's. When men adhere to gender norms via their performing their masculine traits, they are applauded for their leadership skills. When women do the same to fit the masculine norms of politics, women are seen as aggressive and cold and risk driving voters away. However, if women do not exert masculinity, they are seen as too feminine to be competent leaders. In other words, female political leaders are always in a catch-22 situation. When female politicians face this double-bind, how should they act?

In addition to politicians' personal traits, gender also plays a role in voters' evaluations of politicians' ideologies and capabilities in representing their interests. Voters consider women to be more liberal than men, leaving women less popular among right-wing voters than men are (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009). Similarly, because of these gendered biases, female political leaders are also expected to be more capable of dealing with feminine issues – issues that are considered women's domains, such as welfare, healthcare, education, and family – whereas men are expected to be more equipped with handling the economy, defense, military, and foreign policy – issues that are masculine or considered men's domains.

Although male and female MPs should both be qualified to do well in representing various issues that concern the public, the reality is that women are delegated to

feminine policies or committees that are considered low-prestige or low-impact whereas men are considered to be better suited to combat masculine policies that are considered high-prestige or high-impact (Krook and O'Brien 2012). Again, this is not to suggest that issues like education, child, and family are not important, but rather to highlight that the underlying assumption that men should tackle masculine issues and are more competent than women are when it comes to leadership.

These gender biases also sideline women, impacting their political careers. The type of committees or policies that are assigned to women MPs has significant implications as committee work provides MPs an opportunity to develop and shape policies. Yet, more senior members of parliament – a traditionally male-dominated institution – often place women on committees that are less desired with scarce political resources or less opportunities to have an influence (Heath et al. 2005).

Moreover, while there are no requirements for which constituency men and women politicians should represent, gender stereotyping determines how men and women politicians act legislatively. Constituents often expect women MPs to be experts in feminine issues, leaving them not much of a choice but to sponsor bills related to issues that they are expected to represent because of their gender. These gendered expectations further marginalize women's place in parliament. Not only are women isolated to "women's domain" committees, but they are pressured to stay on these committees (Schwindt-Bayer 2006). At the end of the day, even when women have shattered the barriers to gain a seat at the table, they still do not have full agency in how they represent their constituents.

Are Political Parties and the Media Helping Women?

Not only do voters perceive and evaluate politicians based on gender stereotypes, scholarship also shows that gender biases do not transcend political parties (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2008). That is, regardless of which party a woman belongs to, she is likely to be judged based on her gender. Nevertheless, the implications for how gender stereotypes may hurt or help women differ across parties. Gender stereotypes appear to prevent Republican women from entering the political arena as they are more likely to stereotype themselves. Women who hold conservative ideology may be less confident about women's competency in general, making them less likely to see women as equipped politically as men are. This finding could also be applied to explain how the U.K. Conservative Party holds the lowest percentage of women candidates.

In addition to political parties having an interaction effect with gender stereotypes, the media are also found to mediate the biases against women. Not only are the media found to employ and perpetuate gender stereotypes when representing female politicians, the media coverage of female politicians can be both blatantly sexist, as well as subtly discriminatory. Female MPs are allocated less speaking time than male MPs; female MPs are disrupted more when they actually get to speak on the parliament floor (Hooghe et al. 2015). At the same time, issues that do not concern the public, such as female political leaders' appearance and wardrobe choices, is paid more attention than that of their male counterparts. A comprehensive guide to Theresa May's favorite brands can be found in *the Telegraph*, for example. How many times were David Cameron's or Tony Blair's fashion moments reported when they were the Prime Minister? A dress that German Chancellor, Angela

Merkel, wore to a gala in 2008 also raised much international attention (or eyebrows). Headlines like “Merkel’s weapons of mass destruction” were used by the *Daily Mail*. Women political leaders’ domestic life is also under the spotlight. Women politicians are frequently asked about how they juggle their political responsibilities as mothers and wives whereas men politicians’ abilities to balance work and family are rarely questioned.



The Frivolous Shoes

Move over Agatha Christie: May is the modern mistress of the sartorial red herring and it usually comes in the form of a jewel-studded/velvet-bebowed/glitter-heeled pair of shoes from Russell & Bromley or Beverly Feldman, which she reportedly stores in plastic boxes. In 2009 she told the BBC: “It is quite widely known that I like shoes. This is not something that defines me as either a woman or a politician, but it has come to define me in the eyes of the newspapers. The good thing is that they are often an ice breaker.” And a distraction from policy. As she added on *The One Show*, the press interest “gives me a very good reason for going and buying some more”.

Vogue Magazine details and discusses Theresa May’s wardrobe by calling it strong and stable.



**Eyebrows raised as
billboards of Angela
Merkel's cleavage spring up
across Germany with
slogan: 'We have more to
offer'**

These examples illustrate that the media often represent women politicians as women first and politicians second. Not only are gender stereotypes and norms

reinforced by the media, women politicians continue to be belittled when their male counterparts are represented as the default in the political arena. The discrepancy in how the media construct the images of male and female politicians have long term consequences. For example, such gendered representation of female politicians also leads to how the public view the abilities and leadership of men and women. It then becomes a vicious cycle: the general public also evaluate women with harsher and different stands; women are less likely to run for public seats because of the scrutiny and double blind they may face; gender parity cannot be achieved in political institutions.

More importantly, recent research shows that stereotyping is not an automatic response of voters towards politicians. Instead, voters assign female candidates feminine traits when they are prompted to do so by the media (Bauer 2015). When political campaigns portray women candidates with stereotypes, those who are exposed to these biased messages are more likely to view these candidates in a stereotypical way. This finding suggests that stereotyping is not always automatic; instead, it can be mediated.

Moving Forward towards Cracking Gender Stereotypes

Women are certainly far from being equally represented in political institutions. Parity signals progress; nevertheless, it is also essential to examine how female political leaders are treated once they are on the paths to or in the position of power.

Research indicates that women candidates and officeholders are biased and discriminated against because of their gender, which result in women having to do more to prove themselves in the political arena. One caveat remains, though, it is possible to mediate – or lessen – gender biases as the media are shown to mediate the gendered assumptions.

If gender stereotyping is not innate, what can be done? Clearly, gender biases cannot be eliminated overnight. Concrete actions need to be taken toward eliminating gender-based biases. Before concrete actions can be taken, though, it is imperative to recognize how power is structured in electoral institutions, in political parties, in the media, and in everyday lives. Gender stereotypes of female politicians are derived from the unequal power distributions in the family, in the community, and in society.

These gender norms that are imposed upon women bar women from entering politics. On the one hand, girls are socialized into believing that they do not belong in the political arena because politics are a men's domain. Although young women are less politically ambitious than young men are, Fox and Lawless (2010) also demonstrate that young women are as likely as men to consider public office as a profession if they are encouraged. This finding illustrates the importance to transform public attitudes toward gender norms via recruiting women and helping women envision themselves as equal to their male counterparts.

On the other hand, family responsibilities are a major barrier for women to engage in public affairs. Since the 2015 general election, 45% of the women in the House of Commons have no children whereas only 28% of men are childless. Underlying this striking difference is the fact that women with familial responsibilities are less likely to

enter politics. One way to combat that would be to ensure equal contribution of domestic labor between men and women. Moreover, this difference also suggests that women have a more difficult time balancing family and political work, possibility forcing female MPs to choose between family and a political career. Another way to overcome this dilemma would be for the Westminster to set a leading example by allowing breastfeeding, providing childcare, and offering paid family leave. While these issues seem to only concern women, it is also necessary to hold male politicians accountable for making political institutions an inclusive place for women.



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden takes baby to work.

While these actions will not shatter patriarchy overnight, they can be the starting point of eliminating the obstacles for women to be politically present. Moreover, they could help rifle everyday sexism that often gets away through discourses that suggest that women's and men's abilities are innately different.

Women MPs after 2020: parties must be held to account



10 January 2017

Women and Equalities Committee makes recommendations for achieving gender parity and equality in the House of Commons.

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